

## Short Prayers: The Desert Tradition

### *Praying Scripture Continually*

Abba Macarius was asked, “How should one pray?” The old man said, “There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one’s hand and say, “Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.”

1. Without a prayer? How do we live in the midst of a very secular world and retain a sense of the presence of God? The dangers of spiritual absent-mindedness (especially for men!).

2. Prayer without ceasing: Possible?

“Pray continually.”  
—1 Thess. 5: 17

“I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.”  
—Psalm 34: 1

2. *History*: The Strange World of John Cassian, (c. 365- c. 435), Sixteen Hundred Years Ago



3. *Theology*: The Goal of Cassian (Conferences 1 & 10)

Matt. 5:8 – “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”

“Our objective is purity of heart . . . for without this the goal cannot be reached. . . . You have purity of heart for an objective and eternal life as the goal. . . . Everything we do, our every objective, must be undertaken for the sake of this purity of heart. This is why we take on loneliness, fasting, vigils, work, nakedness. For this we must practice the reading of Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to

trap and to hold our hearts free from the harm of every dangerous passion and in order to rise step by step to the high point of love.” Cassian, *Conf.* 1.5, 7.

John 17: 22-24 – “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

“He will be all that we are zealous for, all that we strive for. He will be all that we think about, all our living, all that we talk about, our very breath. And that union of Father and Son, of Son and Father, will fill our senses and our minds. As God loves us with a love that is true and pure, a love that never breaks, we too will be joined to Him in a never-ending unshakable love, and it will be such a union that our breathing and our thinking and our talking will be ‘God.’ And we will come at last to that . . . goal which the Lord prayed to be fulfilled in us: ‘That they may all be one as we are one, as I am in them and you in me so that they are utterly one.’ ‘Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am.’

This, then, is the goal of the monk. All his striving must be for this . . . a foretaste in this body of the at life and glory of heaven. . . . to have the soul rise each day to the things of the spirit, until all its living and all its wishing become one unending prayer.” Cassian, *Conf.* 10.7.

#### 4. *Practice*: The Practice of Cassian

“To keep the thought of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: ‘Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue’ [Ps. 70:1].” Cassian, *Conf.* 10.10.

—biblical meditation (intensive)

—arrow prayers (against temptation)

—concentrated prayer (aware of God’s presence)

#### 5. *Impact*: The Influence of Cassian

—on the Eastern Church through the “Jesus Prayer”

—on the Western Church through the standard worship service

#### 6. *Assessment*: Questions for Cassian

How is Cassian’s method of unceasing prayer Christian and not simply the repetition of a mantra in the way of Hinduism or Buddhism, or simply a psychological focusing technique or mindfulness practice?

#### 7. *Living This*: Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue. Ps. 70.1